

# Students' lunch boxes have too many treats, not enough meats, study says

By Los Angeles Times, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.09.14

Word Count **567**



Brianna Delcid-Gomez, 7, (right) sitting with Ruth Gebregiorgis, 8, (left) and Amina Sharif, 7, (center) eat lunch at the Patrick Henry Elementary School in Alexandria, Virginia, April 29, 2014. Photo: AP/Susan Walsh

A lunch packed at home will usually be healthier than lunch bought in the school cafeteria, right? According to a new study, that may not be true.

Researchers recently observed 337 kids at a dozen schools in Houston. They found that the average lunch students brought from home was not as healthy as you might think.

Packed lunches did not include enough vegetables, fruit, meat or whole grains. They also included too much salt, soda and dessert.

School cafeterias have to follow a number of health rules. Since 2012, schools that are part of the National School Lunch Program have had to follow the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. These guidelines say how much of each kind of food a cafeteria lunch has to include. These rules make sure that school lunches are healthy. There are no rules for lunches packed at home, though.

## **Missing Food Groups**

In the Houston schools studied, there were big differences between cafeteria food and packed lunches.

Cafeteria lunches had more than seven times as much fruit as packed lunches. They also had more than 30 times as many vegetables and about five times as much meat or a meat alternative.

In other words, home-packed lunches were missing a lot of important food groups. What did they include instead?

The short answer: junk food. Average packed lunches for elementary school students included 4.43 ounces of sugary drinks. They also included 0.58 of a serving of chips and 0.67 of a serving of dessert.

Cafeteria lunches do not come with these treats. Sugary drinks, chips and dessert are not served in schools that follow the National School Lunch Program guidelines.

## **Tasty But Unhealthy**

The new study comes at a time when children's nutrition is an important topic. More American children are overweight than ever before. Being overweight can cause a number of health problems. The meals that children are eating could be a big cause of the problem. Much of the cheapest and tastiest food these days is also the unhealthiest.

For these reasons, there are rules about what kind of food cafeterias can serve. Students might love it if a cafeteria served pizza every day, but it would not be healthy. Cafeterias are required to serve balanced and healthy meals. Parents do not always follow the same rules, though.

Cafeteria lunches appear to be healthier, in general, than packed lunches. But are the lunches cheap enough for students to buy?

According to the new study, the answer is yes. Cafeteria lunches for elementary school students were actually cheaper than packed lunches. The total cost of packed lunches ranged from 69 cents to \$4.78 per meal. The average cost was \$1.93. The average cafeteria lunch cost \$1.80.

In middle school, cafeteria lunches were only slightly more expensive than packed lunches.

## **What To Do?**

The new study raises interesting questions. Schools have improved the quality of lunches they serve, thanks to new rules. What should be done about students who are eating unhealthy food they bring from home?

It may not be easy to change what kind of food parents pack for their kids. The government was able to change cafeteria food by passing new rules. Changing packed lunches might be more challenging.

The new study may be a good starting point. Not much is known about the nutritional value of packed lunches. Studies like this one can help educate parents about their food choices.

## Quiz

1 Select the paragraph from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4] that would make the BEST summary of the article.

2 Select the sentence that supports the main idea of the article the LEAST.

- (A) Average packed lunches for elementary school students included 4.43 ounces of sugary drinks.
- (B) Cafeteria lunches had more than seven times as much fruit as packed lunches.
- (C) Cafeteria lunches for elementary school students were actually cheaper than packed lunches.
- (D) Schools have improved the quality of lunches they serve, thanks to new rules.

3 Read the sentence from the article.

*Researchers recently observed 337 kids at a dozen schools in Houston.*

Which word has the same meaning as "observed" in the sentence above?

- (A) noticed
- (B) saw
- (C) watched
- (D) detected

4 Read the sentence from the article.

*Not much is known about the nutritional value of packed lunches.*

Which sentence from the article gives a hint to the meaning of "nutritional"?

- (A) Researchers recently observed 337 kids at a dozen schools in Houston.
- (B) They found that the average lunch students brought from home was not as healthy as you might think.
- (C) These guidelines say how much of each kind of food a cafeteria lunch has to include.
- (D) In the Houston schools studied, there were big differences between cafeteria food and packed lunches.



## Answer Key

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**Paragraph 1:**

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